

# ROBERT LOWELL

## Personal Context

- Born into prominent, conservative American family, well positioned in New England society.
- Converts to Catholicism in the 1940's
- Mid 1950's an emotionally turbulent time for Lowell.
- Suffers mental breakdowns, is hospitalised to receive treatment for depression
- Both parents die
- Marriage breakdown with 2<sup>nd</sup> wife Elizabeth Hardwick.
- Is politically aware

## Literary Context

- *Life Studies* is the result of a turbulent personal context.
- Text receives National Book Award in 1960 and is lauded for its break from formalist poetry by privileging the subjective voice.
- Text marks a significant shift in American poetic landscape mainly because of its "autobiographical, loosely lyrical, intimate, vulnerable and plain spoken" (free verse) features that marked confessional poetry.
- As described by Lowell, it was a form of poetry that "can only be declaimed...a poetry of scandal".

## Socio-Political Context

- His years of suffering and illness coincided with the coercive political atmosphere of McCarthyism.
- A time when "reckless, unsubstantiated accusations, as well as demagogic attacks on the character or patriotism of political adversaries" was institutional practice to curb the threat of Communism in America.
- For the Union Dead published during the turbulent years of the 1960's: civil rights movement, Bay of Pigs fiasco, Cold War, threat of nuclear war, assassination of JFK
- Lowell is an activist during this time.

**Q. How do these three contextual influences shape Lowell's poetry?**

**A.** The subject matter in the four poems set for study, balances considerations of psyche, his art and his surroundings. Therefore, your analysis of Lowell's meaning must also be three-fold.

**Q. What is a central motif in Lowell's poems?**

**A.** Time. Lowell fuses the personal with the historical. He combines two forms of perception – memory and attention. He searches for the balance between historical awareness and individual responsibility.

**Q. Why examine Lowell from a representational point of view?**

**A.** Poetry is a craft, shaped by the skill of the poet. Words are carefully selected, images deliberately constructed. What we see in Lowell's poetry is the balance between authenticity and fiction. Confessional poetry utilises autobiographical material but reconfigures it artistically. So the question that needs asking, is too what extent are the poems 'confessional' or mere social commentary?

**Q. How can Lowell's poems be characterised?**

**A.** Poems that lament, that search for meaning, look for reconciliation with the past, seek healing, are evocative and highly personal